

Message Text

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DIA WASHDC

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 7010

LIMDIS

E.O. 11652: XGDS-4

TAGS: PINT, PFOR, SY, LE

SUBJECT: SYRIAN DISSIDENT OFFICIAL COMMENTS ON PALESTINIAN
STRATEGY AND SYRIAN MILITARY POLITICS

1. SUMMARY: MFA AMERICAN AFFAIRS DIRECTOR SHOEFI STATED THAT
DISAFFECTED SYRIAN OFFICERS HAVE BEEN INFORMING PALESTINIANS
IN LEBANON OF SYRIAN MILITARY INTENTIONS. HE BELIEVES PALE-
STINIANS HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO PLAY FOR TIME AND DELAY SUB-
MITTING TO SARG MILITARY AND DIPLOMATIC PRESSURES. END SUMMARY.

2. EMBOFF MET WITH MFA AMERICAN AFFAIRS DIRECTOR HAMOUD
SHOEFI PRIOR TO RECENT OFFENSIVE BY SYRIAN MILITARY IN LEBANON.
SHOEFI CLAIMED HE HAD KNOWN "ZERO-HOUR" OF LATE SEPTEMBER
OFFENSIVE IN METN, AND ADDED THAT PALESTINIANS HAD ALSO KNOWN
IN ADVANCE WHEN SYRIAN MILITARY OPERATIONS WOULD COMMENCE.
THIS KNOWLEDGE, HE ASSERTED, ENABLED PALESTINIANS TO WITH-
DRAW IN ORDERLY FASHION. ACCORDING TO SHOEFI, PALESTINIANS
KEPT INFORMED OF SYRIAN MILITARY INTENTIONS BY DISAFFECTED
SYRIAN OFFICERS WHO OPPOSE SARG INTERVENTION IN LEBANON.
SHOEFI SAID IN PAST SOME OFFICERS HAD PURPOSEFULLY MIS-
DIRECTED ARTILLERY FIRE AGAINST PALESTINIANS; HE CLAIMED

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PRS. ASAD HAD BECOME CONCERNED OVER INEFFECTIVE UTILIZATION

OF SYRIAN FIREPOWER DURING SIEGE OF BAALBEK AND FINALLY DECIDED TO SEND IN ARTILLERY FROM RIF'AT AL-ASAD'S LOYAL DEFENSE COMPANIES TO CONCLUDE SIEGE (NOTE: EMBASSY REPORTED INFORMATION FROM RELIABLE SOURCE AT TIME OF BAALBEK SIEGE THAT ARTILLERY UNITS BELONGING TO DEFENSE COMPANIES HAD BEEN SENT TO BAALBEK FOR SHORT PERIOD IMMEDIATELY PRIOR TO CAPTURE OF CITY).

3. ACCORDING TO SHOUFFI, SYRIA OFFERS PALESTINIANS IN LEBANON CHOICE OF DIPLOMATIC OR MILITARY SURRENDER. SHOUFFI REITERATED HIS COMMENT, MADE OFTEN IN PAST, THAT DAMASCUS REGIME WANTS PLO RESPONSIVE TO SYRIAN TUTELAGE. HE DID NOT COMPLETELY REJECT NOTION THAT EGYPT AND/OR IRAQ WOULD INTERVENE MILITARILY TO RESCUE PLO FROM SYRIAN ARMY, BUT AT SAME TIME DID NOT EXPRESS GREAT CONFIDENCE OTHER ARAB REGIMES COULD BE COUNTED UPON BY PALESTINIANS IF MILITARY OPTION THEIR ONLY REMAINING CHOICE. SHOUFFI SAID PALESTINIANS TRYING TO DELAY MAKING DECISION ON EITHER MILITARY OR DIPLOMATIC OPTION. IN HIS VIEW, THEIR ONLY STRATEGY IS TO PLAY FOR TIME, HOPING FOR SUPPORT FROM ARAB LEAGUE, SOVIET UNION, AND FOR NEW AMERICAN INITIATIVE AFTER ELECTION. HIS OWN GOVERNMENT, HE SAID, NOW HAS "GRACE PERIOD" IN WHICH IT MUST RESOLVE LEBANESE CRISIS BEFORE OUTSIDERS ABLE TO INSERT THEMSELVES INTO SETTLEMENT PROCESS AND CONSTRICT SYRIAN FREEDOM OF MANEUVER.

4. ON RELATED SUBJECT, SHOUFFI GAVE FEW MORE DETAILS OF POLITICAL SHIFTS OF "UMRAN OFFICERS" WITH WHOM HE HAS BEEN IN CONTACT. SHOUFFI CLAIMED THAT HIS OWN GROUP AND UMRAN GROUP ONLY SYRIAN POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS WITH NON-SECTARIAN ORIENTATION SINCE JADID COUP OF 1966. WHEN ASAD REGIME ORDERED ASSASSINATION OF UMRAN IN EARLY 1970'S, HIS SUPPORTERS WHO WERE LARGELY MEMBERS OF UMRAN'S TRIBE, THE KHAYYATUN ALAWITES, WERE FORCED TO CHOOSE EITHER TO CHALLENGE ASAD (IN WHICH CASE SHOUFFI SAID THEY WOULD HAVE BEEN CRUSHED) OR BECOME SUPPORTERS OF PRES. THEY CHOSE LATTER COURSE, AND WERE ULTIMATELY REWARDED WITH PLACEMENT IN SEVERAL KEY POSITIONS. AS EXAMPLES, HE CITED BRIG. TAWFIQ JUHNI, COMMANDER OF FIRST ARMORED DIVISION; BRIG. ISKANDAR SALAMAH, OF ENGINEERING CORPS AND LEADER OF "UMRAN GROUP"; AND BRIG. ALI HUSSEIN, FORMER COMMANDER THIRD ARMORED DIVISION. SHOUFFI

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SAID THAT THIS GROUP HAS SIGNALLED ITS CONCERN WITH ASAD'S POLICIES IN LEBANON. HE THOUGHT HOWEVER THAT ASAD NOT FULLY AWARE THEY HAD BEGUN TO MOVE IN DIRECTION OF WITHDRAWING THEIR SUPPORT FROM HIM. SHOUFFI SAID HE FELT HE WOULD TRUST THESE OFFICERS BECAUSE THEY WERE WILLING TO SHARE KEY POSTS IN MILITARY WITH OTHER GROUPS IF THEY ATTAINED POWER.

5. SHOUFFI COMMENTED THAT IF ANYTHING HAPPENED TO PRES.

ASAD, HIS BROTHER RIF'AT WOULD NOT PRESENT MUCH DIFFICULTY TO REGIME'S OPPONENTS. SHOEFI NOTED THAT SOME OF HIS BEST INFORMATION CAME FROM OFFICERS AROUND RIF'AT, AND ADDED THAT MANY OFFICERS RESENTED HIS RATHER HIGH-HANDED BEHAVIOR.

6. SHOEFI SURMISED THAT REASON REGIME PERMITTED HIM TO REMAIN FREE IN SPITE OF HIS REPUTATION AS DISSIDENT WAS THAT ASAD WANTED TO KEEP DOOR OPEN TO POTENTIAL FUTURE RECONCILIATION. HE REMINDED EMBOFF THAT ASAD HAD TWICE ASKED HIM TO TAKE OVER DIRECTION OF BAATH PARTY AFFAIRS, ONCE BEFORE ASAD TOOK POWER AND AGAIN AFTER HIS ACCESSION. SHOEFI SAID HE CAREFUL TO KEEP THIS OPTION OPEN WHILE CONTINUING TO MEET SECRETLY WITH VARIOUS OTHER DISSIDENTS. AS EXAMPLE, HE CLAIMED SOME REGIONAL COMMAND MEMBERS HAD MADE THREE SECRET VISITS TO HIS HOME TO DISCUSS PROBLEMS CAUSED BY LEBANESE CRISIS.

7. COMMENT: SHOEFI'S REMARKS ABOUT SURREPTITIOUS CONTACTS BETWEEN SYRIAN OFFICERS AND PLO IN LEBANON MAY EXPLAIN WHY LATTER APPARENTLY SO WELL INFORMED ABOUT SYRIAN MILITARY INTENTIONS PRIOR TO LAUNCHING OF METN CAMPAIGN AND AGAIN DURING MOST RECENT OFFENSIVE. IN HIS ANALYSIS, SYRIAN MILITARY DISCONTENT WITH INTERVENTION IN LEBANON HAS SOME EFFECT ON IMPLEMENTATION OF SYRIAN STRATEGY, BUT WE DO NOT SEE THIS YET AS SERIOUS CONSTRICTION IN VIEW OF SUPERIORITY IN NUMBERS AND EQUIPMENT OF SYRIAN FORCES. IN SHOEFI'S VIEW, DAMASCUS OFFERS WESTINIANS NO REAL OPTION IN LEBANON; BEST PALESTINIANS CAN HOPE FOR IS DELAY UNTIL NEW FACTOR ADDED TO EQUATION.
MURPHY

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